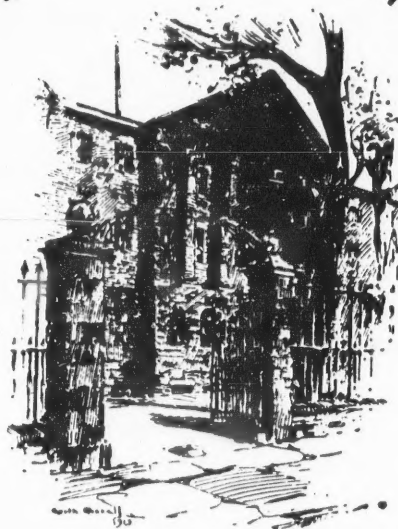


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LECTURE

ON

THE EVILS OF A SUPERFICIAL
EDUCATION.

BY THE REV. DR. MACGREGOR,

PROFESSOR IN SAINT FRANCIS XAVIER'S COLLEGE,

ANTIGONISH, N. S. 1886.

HALIFAX, N. S.:

COMPTON & CO., REDFORD ROW.

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TO
THE RIGHT REVEREND
Colin Francis MacKinnon,
BISHOP OF ARCHAT,

AS A SMALL TRIBUTE TO VARIED LEARNING, VAST ADMINISTRATIVE
CAPACITY, ACKNOWLEDGED WORTH IN ALL THE RELATIONS OF LIFE,

AND ESPECIALLY
UNBOUNDED ZEAL AND MUNIFICENT EXERTIONS IN THE
DIFFUSION OF THE BLESSINGS OF EDUCATION
AMONGST EVER GRATEFUL SPIRITUAL SUBJECTS,

THIS LECTURE
IS DUTIFULLY INSCRIBED.

INTRODUCTION.

Since the College and Seminary of St. Francis Xavier were first established in the town of Antigonish, it has always been customary to open the first session of each scholastic year with a lecture on some subject connected with education. The following pages contain that of the present year. It was delivered, for the greater convenience of a large audience, in the parish chapel of St. Ninian, Sept. 3, 1866, in the presence of the venerable Bishop of the diocese, many of the clergymen of the surrounding country, and a numerous assemblage of the highly respectable people of the town and its vicinity, and was concluded amid the plaudits of the audience.

At the earnest request of friends present at the time, the Lecturer's notes have been secured for publication, with the hope that their perusal may tend in some measure to make scholastic training as practically useful to the disciple as it is generally established throughout the province.

Antigonish, Nova Scotia,

Feast of St. Rose of Viterbo, 1866.

LECTURE.

MY LORD, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,—

The favor with which you were pleased to receive the observations that I made on a former occasion, encourages me to trespass once more on your notice, and bespeak your considerate attention to the remarks which I may make to-day. It is, I presume, in the recollection of nearly every one of you, that a year ago I endeavored, as far as the limited time a lecture necessarily occupies permitted, to demonstrate the necessity of a religious education—the necessity, in other words, of raising education from the low level to which would-be patriots in more countries than one have reduced it, to the high attitude required by the nature of itself in order to render it, as it ought to be rendered, the most efficacious, after religion itself, of all engines in elevating and ennobling the human species. I intend to-day to invite your consideration to another characteristic attribute, and practical withal, the want of which is, unfortunately, the all but universal feature of the scholastic training which the youth of this country is now receiving.

The subject of education, I need not premise, has always elicited a very large share of public attention. Our people have not been indifferent, our clergy has been strenuous, our legislators active and munificent, and our teachers ambitious and energetic. Our youth, too, year after year, has had a longer and longer period of time at their disposal, to devote to educational pursuits. It is an universally admitted fact, that during the few years which our yet infant colony has made of history, our people, generally speaking, have not been more deeply impressed by the importance of any other subject. Rare is the man amongst us, who does not consider education as transcending every thing else in his power to procure for his children; rare, who does not make an effort, more or less earnest, to educate them in a manner which he

deems consistent with the means at his disposal, and befitting the position which he intends them to occupy in after life; and yet, few, very few, scholars are to be met amongst our people. From early infancy to opening manhood, our common, superior, and academic educational institutions are frequented; the fifth and most valuable part of a lifetime is passed in scholastic training of one kind or another; and yet the vast majority of our young men and women emerges from the school-room, and mixes in the wide world of active life, with little more than intelligence enough to understand the ephemeral newspaper literature of the day. Habits of thought, or rather of thinking, they have never learned to form; that reflexive turn of mind has not been acquired, which finds pleasing matter for meditation in almost every occurrence; and as a usual and natural consequence, the leisure hours of maturer years, which might and ought to be profitably devoted to the cultivation of the mental powers, or the casual instruction of others, or the mutual reciprocation of scientific thought, are either frittered away in insipid idleness, or glide by under the unhealthy and morbid excitement, which accompanies, in weak minds, the perusal of an impassioned, exaggerated, and thoroughly improbable novel.

Years ago, when a school-house was scarcely described in the journey of a long summer day; when a school-teacher was so seldom met, as to excite general curiosity; when the building erected by colonial pioneers for educational purposes, exhibited hardly any architectural ornament, other than such as nature and chance gave to a quantity of unhewn timber, fitted one piece with another, so as to exclude and admit the air of heaven and light of day, in almost equal proportions; when the text-books included every possible literary production, that our forefathers carried as a sacred treasure from their trans-Atlantic homes in England, Scotland, France, and Ireland; when the catalogue of school furniture was exhausted by a few benches, less artistically than solidly attached together; when, in a word, the conveniences and appliances to which, in later years, no one of us is a stranger,

were unknown and unthought of; and when, besides, children were withdrawn early from the teacher's care, to assist in the multifarious labors attending the colonization of a wilderness country;—when all this, I say, was too common to elicit comment or attract notice, the youth went forth with a less extensive, I admit, but a more solid and a more useful training, than that which in general they now receive. In our days, we have numerous schools and commodious school-houses, dotted all over the country; we have uniformity of text books; we have wall maps, and black boards, and ball frames, and suitable seats, and proportionate writing desks;—we have every thing but scholars. I do not intend to assert that it is possible, or expedient, even if possible, to have a Newton in every family, or a Johnson in every district; but I maintain that we have not scholars, that is, practical, useful scholars in their own sphere, such as it would not be presumptuous to expect from the interest taken, and the effort made, to diffuse education among all classes of the people. I speak under the correction of such of my auditors as have seen more summer suns and winter snows than myself, when I assert that, years ago, results were more proportionate to the means employed, than they are to-day, in the midst of this enlightened nineteenth century.

To inquire into the causes of this anomaly, to investigate the features of this paradox, is a necessity on the part of us all; to remedy the defect, for defect there obviously exists, is alike the duty of the teacher, the parent, and the pupil. In what, then, does the defect consist? Which portion of our school machinery jars against the rest of the system and partially nullifies the entire procedure? The answer is simple. American education is specious rather than solid; more apparent than real; extensive and superficial out of proportion to its profundity; memorial more than intellectual; the elementary outlines of various branches rather than the complete mastery of one.

“A little learning is a dangerous thing;
Drink deep, or taste not the Pierian spring,”

said the poet of Twickenham, and had he lived in our days, a myriad more of examples would have been forth-

coming to confirm the truth of the pointed couplet. "A little learning" of many and diverse subjects has been, and now is, the bane of our schools. "*Timeo hominem unius libri*," said Cicero. We have readers, writers, grammarians, arithmeticians, geometricians, mathematicians, geographers, astronomers, by the thousand; we have individuals professing to possess the acquirements of all together within the scientific compass of one personality; but we find scarcely one individual an adept in any one art. We have classical scholars poring for years over the beauties of Grecian and Roman literature, and scarcely one who appreciates them—scarcely one that has caught the spirit of the noble languages in the whole of their animating influence—scarcely one that reads Livy or Demosthenes without losing the point of a period, the significance of an epithet, the finely turned shades of skilful flattery, or the withering sarcasm of passing invective, which gives so much gratification to the deeply read classical scholar. American education is not sufficiently thorough, sufficiently exhaustive of any one subject. We aim at too much; our ambition is too much fired; the height we all strive to attain makes the head giddy, when the footsteps by which we ascend are not sufficiently indented in the steep wall, and too many of our young men, after passing through the curriculum of studies, find themselves on calm reflection at the bottom of the very precipice on whose summit they vauntingly stood in their day dreams. Like the Yorkshire rustic, who fondly believed that the Derby cup would be easily won by the to him marvellous speed of his untried ancestral Bucephalus, they find that their mental steeds, instead of distancing all competitors, and being received at the goal amid the plaudits of admiring spectators, have on practical trial hopelessly subsided into a sort of faint reminiscence of an almost forgotten canter. They are trained, too, after a fashion. In school, in class, at public examinations, their readiness is obvious, and their proficiency conceded by auditors and professors. But theirs is not education. The system is radically defective. Their acquirements on paper are imposing; with text

books, even, they are familiar; certain time honored maxims they repeat time and again; but submit them to the ordeal of rigid personal scrutiny; bring them into individual contact with really original and earnest personality; try them as gold in the furnace; bring mind to mind and soul to soul in keen intellectual contest; and the whole panoplied array of acquirements and accomplishments dwindles into a shivering consciousness of actual nothingness. The mind is not really cultivated; the reasoning powers lie almost as dormant as if the owner had yet to make his introductory glance of curiosity at the school door. Effect and display are intended in the training, and the more solid understructure of real mental development is neglected. Effect and display there are, too, but it is the effect and display of the cloud whose airy base shall have vanished before the view is impressed on the retina, not the effect of the dome and the cupola which rest on a granite foundation, and which you view day after day and year after year with emotions of ever increasing gratification. The system aims *per saltum* at the result. The intermediate processes are ignored. The method is only partially effective; and from this partially effective method of education—education comprehensive in the catalogue of subjects it embraces, superficial individually in the treatment of each; exhaustive nominally; actually inceptive, and always so; generically inclusive of the *omne scibile*; inclusive specifically of a few paltry outlines and fewer paltry details—from this method, I assert, now so general on this continent, and introducing itself also imperceptibly, I am sorry to observe, into the higher institutions of the mother country, many evils flow, not only to literature, but also to society and government.

On the one hand, if we consider the subject under the literary aspect, public taste has been rendered less refined; the ring of the true metal, so perceptible in the vigorous prose, and pointed, yet imaginative, poetry, of our older authors, seem to have faded away into remote history, amid the maudlin effusions of a myriad of sciolists, whose only merit, if merit it be, consists in a vague and dreamy mystification of the sublimer and abstruser truths

known to the human intellect. On the other, a strange pomposity of diction, interspersed with stranger epithets, and boldly ridiculous and inapplicable figures of speech, drops from the pen of every aspirant after popular fame with most infelicitous fluency, clothing, as it proceeds, the most commonplace occurrences in a garb of sesquipedalian verbiage, more than capacious enough to describe the devastations of Hastings in India, or all the horrors of the French revolution. David is literally travestied with the ponderous sword and buckler and helmet of Goliath, and naturally fails to discover himself to such persons as were wont to behold him in the simple but graceful vesture of the Jewish shepherd. A half euphonious but unmeaning volubility of expression begins to pass for eloquence; turgidity and bombast for grandeur of conception; indefinite mystification of simple truths for metaphysical profundity, and a multitudinous number of syllables is funnily denominated elegance of language. Such are some of the evils deriving to literature from imperfect education. Would to God that society at large did not suffer socially and morally from the same cause! A literary evil amounts, after all, only to a perversion of taste; and as taste is partially natural, and partially acquired, and, again, as that which is natural is permanent and invariable, it follows that taste can never be radically vitiated. It may be vitiated in this or that particular circumstance, in this or that particular detail; but it has that in it which is natural and undying; it possesses a vivifying spark, which may smoulder, but will perish never; and, hence, however much obscured at times, however apparently insignificant the ember, it ever and anon consumes the dross and debris which surrounded it and temporarily checked its brilliancy; and, at last when the cloud of popular prejudices passes away like the mist of the morning, it bursts forth again in all its pristine transparency. The sentimental silliness of Pamela had its day and host of admirers; the exaggerated supernaturalism of Frankenstein, in not unfaithful imitation of the earlier romances, had its votaries; the licentious and shameless panegyrists of the first Georges pandered to a

doubly corrupt taste, and were called wits; the ponderous syllabication of Sydney was once lauded as poetry; the stiff mannerism of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, even in our own day, floated into general approbation on a whirlwind of applause, and was wafted by ephemeral critics into the seventh heaven of excellence; but taste soon righted itself, and, having regained its position, energetically and forever rejected that which, when it was depraved, it had painted in the most gorgeous of colors. The glittering rainbow of the morning, at the termination of the shower, is only an angry cloud.

Not so easily remedied are evils which eat into the core of society and government; not so easily effaced a stain on morality's page; not so easily rectified a divergence from the course of moral order, or of social subordination. In matters of purely literary taste, the true, the elegant, and the beautiful have their own efficacious charms, while they impose no restraint on the passions, and meet no emulous opposition from the lower and more violent inclinations of human nature. But a social error always panders to a grovelling passion, and a moral delinquency arrays "the world, the flesh, and the devil," in threatening phalanx, in its own defence. Hence, then, the greater danger of our system of education — of a sort of literary Jack-of-all-tradeism in schoolastic proficiency — of that which is virtually literary retrogression.

You ask, perhaps, the number and kind of evils; and my answer is, that they are almost innumerable, and of almost every imaginable species. Proofs may be required of my assertion: I appeal to the invincible argument of fact. Go to the printing presses of this entire continent, — take up leaf after leaf, as it falls damp from the cylinder; walk into the book-stores of fifty millions of English speaking Americans, — examine volume after volume of the matter prepared for the mental pabulum of throngs of willing purchasers; glance at the private libraries scattered over the country, — read from the toybook of the child, through the magazine and three-volumed novel of the youth, up to the larger typed tome which old age slowly peruses, as the lines grow hazy beneath the failing

vision;—and tell me the result of your examination. Is it not indubitably certain, that, of a score of volumes, scarcely one is calculated to improve the tone of public morality, and not more than one in ten is devoted to the cultivation of the useful or esthetic arts? The rest, the remainder, the multitudinous remainder, are simply the morbid reflections of half refined, altogether corrupt, popular authors, whose sole aim would seem to be to excite the animal passions of human nature, and deify concrete humanity, as it exists since the fall. How different from the solid reading the public patronized a generation or two ago, it is not my intention, nor is it necessary, to state. Purchasers soon find authors to suit; and half-educated purchasers will not be offered the opportunity of wearying themselves in search of literature adapted to their comprehension and inclinations. Never trained to think for themselves, sagacious writers know only too well how to think for them; and consequently touch the very chord which has the less spirituality, but the more painted passion, to recommend it to half-educated culture.

Nor is the evil confined to books. The newspaper press also is proportionately affected. Books do an immense evil, but they do good also. The daily, tri-weekly, and weekly press did, and still does, its share of evil; but as truth is, in many cases, either too rare or too costly an ingredient to enter much into the composition newspapers are made of, and as this truth is gradually becoming more widely appreciated, the power for evil daily diminishes, just as newspaper editors in America find that, unlike their brethren in Europe, their control of popular opinion is waning away. They discover that they no longer teach or lead, but obsequiously follow the trail. This I look upon as the dark moment before the dawn. A thinking people will require an intelligent press, and people will of necessity think for themselves, when they shall have lost confidence in the judges of Israel. Educate the readers, and the press will arise, Phoenix like, from the ashes of desolation, to which subserviency and abuse have reduced it, to the great position for it intended in the nature of things, and become, in this country, what it is

in other countries — a heaven-sent gift in the work of enlightenment and civilization.

But the evil of imperfect education rests not here. It permeates, through the printing establishment, society in all its channels. Designing demagogues flourish, ardent patriots die, under the exhalations of its pestiferous breath. Popular clamor sits haughtily in the tribunal of unimpassioned justice, and metes out rewards and punishments with indiscriminating prodigality. Heroes are made and unmade as if by magic wands. The meteor of to-day is the charred stick of to-morrow. Populations are excited to frenzy in the acquisition of imaginary rights, and in the sullen madness of reaction see real ones fall from their nerveless grasp in despondent resignation. Society suffers through all the ramifications of its machinery. Men enter into the forum whom nature intended for the bench of St. Crispin; medicine has its nostrums, and patent specifics, and quacks presuming to be dispensers of life and death, whose training would scarcely add accomplishments to a professor of the culinary art; and worse still, the most sacred of all avocations, the seat of religion itself, has been profaned, and the Holy Volume, which "the ignorant wrest to their own destruction," desecrated by the caricatured explanation of newly manufactured clerics, whom one day sometimes transfers from the penitentiary to the pulpit. I speak of facts to which no one acquainted with the current events transpiring in the neighboring republic of the United States will hazard a contradiction. Spiritualism and all its prolific train of misfortunes; clairvoyance, the abuse of magnetism, and all its deceptive illusions, hurry along an unthinking people to the obliteration of the last shred of morality. Religion itself is, in many cases, received only in fractions, and fractions, too, so infinitesimal in their extension, that the portion of these alone is smaller who possess none at all of the commodity either for private use or public edification. These are the effects of imperfect and superficial scholastic training. Men boast of these effects—of that which, if really known, would be shunned as hideous and disgraceful, and in the gyves of their ignorance they hug,

with a wild and convulsive embrace, the very chain that drags them to a lower and still lower depth.

Ask the remedy? You know the cause. Let education be thorough. If it be but a black mark that the tiny childish fingers essay to draw, let it be a straight one; if it be the letters of the alphabet that the child's lips learn to pronounce, let the enunciation be distinct; if it be a simple reading lesson, let the reading be really reading, and the English really English, and not a curious amalgamation of half a dozen outlandish sounds, with a Chinese monesyllabic drone to fill up the interstices; if it be an exercise in ordinary calligraphy, let the characters be faultless and the words legibly written, so that one part of a phrase be not left to conjecture, another perhaps read, and a third deferred to a clearer atmosphere and future consideration. In one word, let progress be estimated by its profundity, not by its extension. Let habits of thought be formed. The child, after all, is a little man, and let him learn to think, or rather let not the spontaneous evolution of his thinking faculties be retarded or stopped by crowding the mind with undigested and unappreciated matter. In education, as in everything else, let that which is done be well done.

That it be so must be the care of the teachers of youth. To them, consequently, I address the remaining observations which I have to make. They ought to remember that the panegyric, if I may reverently say so, of Him who was Perfection itself, was that "He did all things well," "*omnia bene fecit*." The sanctity of ascetic theology consists not in the moving of mountains, or in the restoration to inanimate clay of the departed breath, but in the thorough well-doing of ordinary actions. The sun fertilizes the earth, not because it radiates through space immense, but because it penetrates to the deepest roots of each particular blade of grass. All the works of nature are exhaustive. Art must be exhaustive, too, to be effective, and the art of educating youth is of the noblest whose exercise was concredited to man. After the minister of religion, who stands up charged with the great commission to unfold the eternal immutable dogmas,

which Wisdom Infinite has vouchsafed to reveal to enlighten, ennoble, and amaze man's opening comprehension, the educator of youth has the most sublime mission. His is the exalted duty to develop the latent energies of the human soul, to direct and control the imperishable tendency of man's restless intellect in search of objective truth, to lay a foundation out of which the grace of Addison, or the poetry of Milton, or the warlike genius of Napoleon, or the eloquence of Pitt, or the science of a Leibnitz, may, perhaps, at some future period be developed. His the part, in all cases, to prepare the way for all the vicissitudes of after life, in which mind shall meet mind, and men have to wage the battle of life. His, then, is clearly the obligation of fulfilling his avocation with scrupulous accuracy, with unwavering fidelity. A false step in the beginning, like the thin edge of the wedge, widens as education progresses. One imperfectly understood principle necessitates the ignorance of a long concatenation of consecutaries flowing from it. One false principle similarly induces a train of false consecutaries, just as a decayed portion of the trunk of the oak withers the branches on the same side to its lofty summit. One downward impetus, like the first and almost imperceptible motion of the Alpine avalanche, is but the prelude to a devastating course of swift destruction. One small defect in early youth, like the little dark cloud on the morning sky of a West India horizon, widens as education proceeds, until at the noonday sun, it bursts out in the terrific desolation of the hurricane; and in the calm of the evening of life, men discover that all their labors have to be recommenced anew on a surer foundation, and with more accurate workmanship.

The education of youth is mental architecture. The solid rock of principle must lie at the foundation. The walls, and pillars, and braces, must be built, and shaped, and fitted with scrupulous care. Piece must be adapted to piece, foot to meet foot, inch to meet inch, greater to greater, less to less. Ornament must harmonize with material, and material must harmonize with ornament. All must be proportionate, one part to another, and all to the use for which

the edifice is designed. Thus will the entire building rise in graceful grandeur and commodious usefulness. Storms shake it not; the rains of heaven pierce it not through; frost and cold stay at the threshold: because the workmanship was good, and the material faultless. So, too, must our teachers of youth train themselves to fulfill their high position in life; so, too, will a benefited people avoid the many evils consequent on imperfect education.

I have now arrived at the conclusion of my remarks — remarks which must necessarily have tired your patience as much in listening to, as my vocal organs in delivering. I thank you for the favor of your marked attention throughout. No one is more sensible than myself of the continued violation I have made, during the whole course of my observations to-day, of the rule which I was laying down for your guidance, namely, that whatever is done ought to be well done. No one, then, can be more grateful for the forbearance you have shown; but I ask you to forget the defects of the lecture in the magnitude of the subject, and to appreciate the good will, where the actual performance deserves reprobation.

Located amongst you, I consider your powers of discerning the true, the just, and the beautiful, as not the least charm of your society; connected with the literary institution which opens to-day, I solicit your attention to its progress; and allow me here, as one of its professors, in presence of its learned originator, and most munificent patron; in presence of more than one that has already participated in the benefits it confers; in presence of many who yet hope to taste the sweet draughts of Helicon within its classic portals; in presence of all you that know

“ ——— ingenuas didicisse fideliter artes
Emollit mores, nec sinit esse feros,”

to avow the resolve of myself and my colleagues in the work, that the maxims I have endeavored to elucidate shall, with the help of God, be the distinctive feature of scholastic training in St. Francis Xavier's College.

THE END.

